

Preface

*Writing ASAO Histories**

Keeping our written history as an association has been on the “to-do list” of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO) since very early in its existence—although it was often pretty far down on that list and sometimes fell out of awareness. The ASAO histories included in this collection follow and build on previous efforts over the decades.

In October 1971, Vern Carroll, who was then Chair of the association’s Executive Committee (EC), sent a memo to the other committee members prior to their scheduled November 18 meeting with several thoughts about the agenda.¹ One concern was the need to add to the bylaws a requirement to keep a written history of the new association:

It is reasonable to suppose that, before very long, all of those involved in the founding and early organization of ASAO will have been replaced by “new blood.” I feel we owe it to those coming after us to leave them an organization which has an established identity, which functions coherently and smoothly, and provide them with a detailed plan for keeping the thing going. ...

There is the oft-noted problem of “corporate memory” in a small organization of this kind. Apart from the question of *how* we operate (which I referred to above), there is the question *why* we operate as we do. The founders and early officers of ASAO have worked together to develop an organization of a certain kind. Those who replace them should at least be aware of what these goals were (if only to have a rational basis for changing them). Since the chances for all of this being passed on orally seem slight, I propose that we make some sort of written corporate memory available to those newly involved in the decision-making process (i.e., the fellows, EC members, and officers). I feel we should have a written history, and a specified means of keeping it up to date. A proposed by-law on this subject is appended.

* Rensel, Jan. 2021. The Origins and Development of the Pacific Islands Scholars Fund. ASAO Histories Paper 1. Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, May. <http://hdl.handle.net/10524/63972>

Carroll's proposed bylaws were approved by the Executive Committee at the November 1971 meeting and were published in *ASAO Newsletter* #9 (Winter 1972), including one bylaw stating that the Executive Committee's Chair should, with input from Fellows and others who attended the meetings, keep a history. This history would be circulated to all members of the committee and passed on from chair to chair, each of whom would add to it. Also, "from time to time," the Chair would prepare "abstracts" of the history to be published in the *ASAO Newsletter*.²

While the Chair of the Executive Committee (which subsequently became the Board of Directors) as well as the various officers did keep and pass along to their successors physical files of important records, the actual writing of the association's history was not attempted until longtime ASAO Secretary and *Newsletter* Editor James Nason submitted "A Brief History" of the association to the board in 1976. Nason's history, covering 1966–1975, was then published in two installments in the *ASAO Newsletter* (#25 [Fall 1977]: 5–11; #27 [Summer 1978]: 9–14). Installment 1 recorded the first symposium (on adoption), held in March 1967; the first (ASAE) *Newsletter*,³ published in May 1967; the first (ASAO) annual meeting, held in March 1972; and the organization's formal incorporation in August 1973. It also listed the sessions held at all meetings during the period. Installment 2 documented the topics covered in each of the first seventeen issues of the *Newsletter*; listed the names of officers and board members for each year; and provided an annual schedule of responsibilities for various board and officer roles.

Ten years later, the Board of Directors revisited the problem of keeping the association's history. According to the minutes of the 1988 board meeting:

The board discussed Article III, section 7 [of the ASAO Bylaws], regarding the charge to the Chair to keep a history of the corporation and pass it on to his or her successor. The board realized that a cumulative history is valuable for the organization and that much will be lost without some salvage work during the coming year.

MOTION: Jim Boutilier moved and Dan Jorgensen seconded the following motion: That the board appoint a “Coordinator of the ASAO History Project,” who will form a working group and report at the next meeting on the progress of the project.

AGREED: Unanimously.

Mimi Kahn and Terry Hays will approach Mac Marshall to request that he take the position as Coordinator of the ASAO History Project.

Meanwhile, historical records had to be maintained. At the February 1992 annual meeting, the ASAO Board discussed how to compile and store ASAO archival material. Chair Leslie Marshall reported that James Nason agreed to keep the materials in his office at the University of Washington’s Burke Museum for the time being. Present and past officers were contacted to send their files to Nason. Mac Marshall worked with Nason and Karen Peacock to transfer these physical files from Seattle to Honolulu in 1999. After Gene Ogan was appointed ASAO Archivist, he and I worked on further organizing the files, which included not only meeting minutes and officers’ reports but also early official correspondence, membership lists, and meeting attendance records, schedules, and programs. We also solicited additional documents from past Board members and officers to fill in missing items. In January 2003 the official ASAO Archive was established in the Hamilton Library’s Pacific Collection at the University of Hawai‘i–Mānoa (UHM).

As part of the ASAO History Project, Mac Marshall planned a “memory panel” for the twenty-fifth annual meeting in 1996. Founding members especially were to be invited to participate, and the focus was to be “on the role that ASAO and, more broadly, anthropology in Oceania, have played in the discipline at large” (*ASAO Newsletter* #93 [December 1995]: 8). The resulting discussion session was well attended, although no prepared papers or structured reports

were required, the event was not recorded, and no formal account appeared in subsequent *Newsletters*.

The idea of collecting oral histories of “elder members” of the association has resurfaced from time to time. Per the minutes of their 2007 annual meeting, the Board and officers engaged in an open-ended “lively consideration of objectives, organization, and methodology. ... Ideas concerning actual data collection included starting with a list of possible elder participants and securing their permission; pairing the selected elder with someone who knows her or him well, through having worked together for example, and doing a series of tape-recorded interviews for deposit in the ASAO archives; recording the interviews on videotape; and asking selected elders to write about themselves.” The minutes of the 2009 Board and officers meeting revisited this proposal; while the Board concluded that the idea was “highly commendable,” it was not a project that “the Board felt ready to take on at this time.”

Meanwhile, other members came up with ways of contributing to the association’s written history. Back in 1990, Rick Feinberg, while serving as *ASAO Newsletter* Editor, introduced an initiative to keep track of the papers that emerged from ASAO sessions:

Let me announce a new Newsletter feature: a directory of publications resulting from ASAO sessions. Those of us who have been with ASAO for some time feel that our association produces work of unusually high quality. To document that this is true, however, is a different matter. Titles in our Monograph series are readily accessible, but many members may be less aware of much fine work that originated with ASAO but ultimately was published elsewhere. The listing will help document what ASAO has meant to anthropology and Pacific Island studies. ... Because of the size of this issue, the directory will begin, in serial format, with the summer Newsletter. Please send your vitae by mid-July to ensure inclusion. (*ASAO Newsletter* #74 [Spring 1990]: 2)⁴

Feinberg invited members to send him the bibliographic details for any of their publications that had been developed in the context of ASAO sessions. He published the resulting lists in a series of *ASAO Newsletters* (#75–#80) and then, with his graduate assistant Susan Win, compiled the

information into a single 38-page “ASAO Bibliography: Publications Resulting from Sessions at Annual Meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania,” which was submitted to the ASAO Board at the March 1991 annual meeting and made available to interested members. The minutes for that meeting acknowledge that such a list constituted “a partial history of ASAO.” In September 1995, ASAO Chair Karen Nero issued an open invitation for volunteers to update the bibliography (*ASAO Newsletter* #92 [September 1995]: 23). Karen Peacock and Lynette Furuhashi, ASAO members who were also librarians in the UHM Hamilton Library Pacific and Hawaiian Collections, volunteered to do so, and the 41-page second edition was published in 1996. Both of these documents are available in the UHM Pacific Collection. A significantly longer and updated version was prepared in May 2005 through the efforts of Feinberg’s graduate assistant at the time, Joy St. James; the 92-page document “Publications Resulting from ASAO Sessions” is available on the ASAO website (https://www.asao.org/uploads/4/2/4/8/42488155/asao_bibliography.pdf).

The minutes for the March 1993 annual Board and officers meeting reported that Juliana Flinn, who served as the association’s Secretary-Treasurer from 1987 to 1993, had compiled a history of ASAO Board policy decisions, excerpted from Board meeting minutes and organized by various topics for 1988–1993, and, “in the absence of an ASAO history, she ... recommended that the secretary-treasurer continue this practice to promote continuity.” The responsibility for continuing to do this was added to the 1993 ASAO Bylaws (and retained in the 2010 Bylaws): “The Secretary, in consultation with the Chair of the Board of Directors, will select excerpts from the minutes of the annual meeting of the Board of Directors that reflect policy decisions and ensure that these are added to those from previous minutes and passed on to the next Chair

of the Board of Directors.” When I became Secretary-Treasurer in 1996, I created a new document, extending Flinn’s compilation of policy decisions back to 1985 and up to 1996.

However, compiling those policy decisions has proven elusive, not only for me (beyond 1996) but also for successive Secretary-Treasurers, tasked with other duties. Instead, for several years, the Secretary provided incoming Board members and officers with printed copies of the full minutes of recent Board and officers’ meetings along with ASAO’s bylaws. In 2011, in my role as Archivist, I created an online site to provide Board and officers with access to digital copies of minutes, officers’ reports, and key foundational documents. But a lot of digging is still necessary to uncover and organize information on any particular topic.

It is against this backdrop that the ASAO Histories Project re-emerged in 2015 and took a new turn, engaging a larger group of volunteers to discuss, research, and write up aspects of the association’s past from various perspectives.

Using ASAO Sessions to Write about ASAO’s Histories

The job of keeping track and writing up the history of the association had become much too big for any one person to handle. So the question arose: Why not employ the “ASAO process” and engage the energies of several willing people? Alan Howard and Rick Feinberg agreed to join me in co-organizing an informal session at the 2015 annual meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at which we brainstormed a starter list of topics. The thirty-some individuals in attendance included relative newcomers to ASAO as well as longtime members, former Board members, and officers.

Most of those present indicated interest in contributing to the process of documenting the history of ASAO since its inception in the 1960s. Some proposed to write papers; others agreed to serve as resource persons, session commentators, or reviewers of other people’s drafts. The

group met over the next three years in working sessions and, in between annual meetings, kept in digital touch, helping the authors to clarify their accounts of various aspects of the association's history. Many of the papers include a personal perspective but all are carefully researched and well documented, drawing heavily on archival resources such as the ASAO annual meeting minutes, officers' reports, and the *ASAO Newsletter*.

Whether or not they authored the papers included here, the questions, answers, and feedback of many participants contributed importantly to the development of this set. Warm thanks to the late David Counts, as well as Ivan Brady, Kathy Creely, Dan Jorgensen, Susanne Kuehling, Mike Lieber, Mac Marshall, Kirsten McGavin, Naomi McPherson, James Nason, Nancy Pollock, Albert Refiti, and Judith Schachter. Special appreciation to Rick Feinberg for co-chairing the first session and serving as a sounding board throughout the years, and to Zakea Boeger for creating an online space for us to share and comment on each other's drafts in progress.

Histories in This Collection

Alexander Mawyer and Alan Howard's paper focuses on the development of ASAO's unique structure of annual conferences in support of comparative anthropological research and publication about Pacific Islands. Starting from the very first meeting (a single symposium in 1967), they trace the evolution of ASAO's iconic three session formats—informal session, working session, and symposium—and how session organizers use these to support ongoing discussions of participants' papers over a series of annual meetings, engaging in what David Counts called "the long conversation" (personal communication, December 2015). Drawing on reports published in the *ASAO Newsletter*, Mawyer and Howard compiled a database of some

700 sessions held during ASAO's first half century, and they draw on this to explore historical trends in topics and consider regional emphases. As they note, some sessions resulted in edited publications while others were considered valuable mainly for the discussions they engendered.

As reflected in the ASAO bibliographies discussed above, papers arising from ASAO sessions have been published, collectively or individually, in an ever-expanding array of books and journals. But the ASAO Monograph Series was established very soon after the association's first official annual meeting and has been an integral part of the association ever since. All of its editors since 1983—Margaret (then Rodman) Critchlow, Andrew Strathern and Associate Editor Pamela Stewart-Strathern, Michèle Dominy, Jeannette Mageo, and Rupert Stasch—have collaborated in putting together a detailed history of the series since its inception, reflected against “macro-level challenges and changes in academic publishing,” as Critchlow notes in her introduction to this coauthored paper. Now retitled the ASAO Studies in Pacific Anthropology, the series also publishes single-authored volumes as well as edited collections and is not restricted to those arising from ASAO sessions.

Besides the core work of ASAO in sessions, ASAO annual meetings have often featured plenary talks, eventually becoming formalized under the label “Distinguished Lectures.” Lamont Lindstrom recounts the history of how these lectures were organized and supported, and how three of them were published in the ASAO Special Publication Series. The journal *Oceania* published the ASAO Distinguished Lectures from 2009 through 2017 and their agreement to do so remains in place.

To support the work of ASAO sessions and special events such as the Distinguished Lectures, it is important to select appropriate annual meeting sites. Michael Rynkiewicz traces the evolving criteria for such sites, the politics of site selection, and the locus of site decision

making since the first meetings, as the ASAO membership has grown and diversified, and as meeting facilities have changed. His engaging account of the “difficult, lengthy, and tiring process” of meeting-site selection over the decades concludes with a list of recommended desirable qualities to keep in mind when selecting future sites.

As Mawyer and Howard note, rather than a governing body, it is ASAO session organizers who determine the topical focus of their sessions—and any member can organize a session, regardless of their academic status. Juliana Flinn’s paper examines ASAO’s history through a focus on its inclusive nature and explicit emphasis on recruiting and involving students and downplaying status distinctions, despite an early restriction of voting rights to the category of “Fellow”—those who had demonstrated a commitment to ASAO by serving as a Board member or officer or by contributing to or editing a volume of papers arising from ASAO sessions. Flinn traces efforts to expand voting rights through various ways of defining member categories, which for a while inadvertently privileged people with doctoral degrees (especially in anthropology) over graduate students and those with degrees in other fields; this was remedied in a 1985 amendment to the ASAO Bylaws extending voting rights to all individual members.

In her account of the mentoring influence of longtime ASAO member Jane Goodale, Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi further illustrates how undergraduate and graduate students were encouraged to attend ASAO meetings and become involved, not only in organizing sessions but also in taking on other leadership roles as Board members and officers, building long-lasting networks in the process, while contributing invaluable to sessions and resultant publications.

Following several individual efforts to support the increased participation of Pacific Islander scholars in ASAO sessions, the ASAO Board established the Pacific Islands Scholars Fund (PISF) in 1993. The Pacific Islands Scholars Award (PISA), as it now called, is funded by

ASAO member contributions and provides travel awards as well as waivers of meeting registration fees and membership dues. Jan Rensel recounts the origins of the fund as well as the various accompanying ways that ASAO members have provided additional support and mentorship to encourage and facilitate Pacific Islander engagement in ASAO, including leadership positions.

As first constituted in 1967, the focus of the association (then called the Association for Social Anthropology in Eastern Oceania) did not include New Guinea, but by 1970 that had changed, and ASAO dropped the word “Eastern” from its name. Gradually, New Guinea researchers became more involved in ASAO, but from the early 1980s until 1995 Melanesianists shared research information and ideas via a newsletter called *NEWS*. Rich Scaglion analyzes the purposes and content of *NEWS*, which eventually became redundant with the *ASAO Newsletter* and the advent of the ASAONET listserv and the ASAO website in the mid-1990s.

A history of the *ASAO Newsletter*, including its contents over the decades since 1967, is currently being written to be added to this set of papers. The ASAONET listserv was first announced in the April 1994 issue of the *ASAO Newsletter* and quickly became a vibrant space for sharing news from the Pacific; raising topics that might stir up sufficient interest to warrant an informal session at the next meeting or invite people to join an ongoing session; posting notices of other conferences, calls for papers, or invitations to review books; or requesting bibliographic information (*ASAO Newsletter* #88: 3-4). Thorgeir Kolshus’s paper recounts his experience as a user of the listserv as his introduction to ASAO’s style of interaction. Alan Howard set up the ASAO website in 1997 and maintained until 2015; his paper provides an overview of the site’s purposes and content. Now managed by Zakea Boeger, the website

continues to be an important online resource for information about the association, upcoming meetings, session announcements, and ASAO Board member and officer contacts.

These ASAO histories are, of course, ongoing, and there are more histories to be written, more perspectives to be shared. But for now, please enjoy reading these latest contributions to ASAO's project of recording its past.

Jan Rensel
Honolulu, May 2021

Notes

1. All association correspondence and meeting minutes cited in this article, including drafts of and commentary on early versions of the association bylaws, are in the ASAO Archives at the University of Hawai'i–Mānoa Hamilton Library's Pacific Collection.
2. All issues of the *ASAO Newsletter* are available on the ASAO website at <https://www.asao.org/asao-newsletters.html>.
3. The first five issues of the newsletter were published under the original name of the organization, the Association for Social Anthropology in Eastern Oceania (*ASAO Newsletter* #5 [March 1970]: 1).
4. The Spring 1990 (#74) issue of the *ASAO Newsletter* was mistakenly labeled Winter 1990 (#73), as explained by the editor on page 1 of the Summer 1990 issue (#75).